

THE
BISHOP OF EXETER'S
S E R M O N
PREACHED BEFORE THE
HOUSE OF LORDS,
ON
SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 1779.

Die Lunæ, 1° Februarij, 1779.

ORDERED by the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in Parliament assembled, That the Thanks of this House be and are hereby given to the Lord Bishop of *Exeter*, for the Sermon by him preached before this House on *Saturday* last, in the Abbey-Church, *Westminster* : And he is hereby desired to cause the same to be forthwith printed and published.

ASHLEY COWPER,
Cler. Parliamentor.

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S E R M O N

PREACHED BEFORE THE

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LORDS SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL,

I N

THE ABBEY-CHURCH, WESTMINSTER;

O N

SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 1779:

Being the Day appointed to be observed as the Day of the
MARTYRDOM of King CHARLES I.

BY JOHN LORD BISHOP OF EXETER.

Ref (B) 72

L O N D O N:

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PROVERBS xxiv. 21.

MY SON, FEAR THOU THE LORD, AND THE KING;
AND MEDDLE NOT WITH THEM THAT ARE GIVEN
TO CHANGE.

THIS advice of the wise man comprehends the great principles of human conduct, upon which not only the prosperity and happiness, but also the very being of civil society depends. A single man without religion, without submission to legal authority, and led away by a factious and meddling spirit, is a very hurtful member of the state; and introduces disorder and confusion as far as his power and influence extend. The disorder and confusion always encrease in proportion of the number of those, who are of this character. And if this were the general character; if men were universally irreligious, disobedient, and factious, the disorder and confusion would also be universal.

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THE condition of mankind indeed is never quite so bad as this. History doth not, I believe, afford an example of any country, which hath been entirely without the influence of religion and laws ; nor do we experimentally know, what the effect of such a situation as that would be. But history and experience afford examples enough of the want of the due influence of both over the conduct of men ; and of the close connection, which it has with public distress and misery : and enable us clearly to discern the general cause, to which we ought to ascribe the various degrees and proportions of distress and misery in every age and country.

IF it were proper to illustrate this observation by an induction of facts, it might be done with the greatest ease. The annals of our own country in general, and of those great calamities in particular, which are the occasion of the present solemnity, would afford as much matter for this purpose, as any other in the history of mankind. But I forbear to do this. It is unnecessary. It would only be a repetition of that, which has been often said before : and having just now, in obedience to public authority, humbled ourselves before the throne of

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grace ;

grace; acknowledged the guilt, and bewailed the miseries, in which our ancestors were involved; and implored the Divine Mercy to interpose in preserving us from the like guilt and misery again; we cannot fill up the measure of our devotions better, nor be more usefully employed, than in recollecting our own duty, and how we ought to behave, in order to obtain this merciful interposition of Providence in our favour.

THE words, which I have repeated to you at the beginning of this discourse, direct our attention to this enquiry; and suggest such lessons of instruction, as would, if they were universally followed, not only give duration and stability to the happiness, which we at present enjoy; but encrease and improve it to such a degree, that we might apply to ourselves the completion of that promise, upon the assurance of which we look for “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth “righteousness:” and cry out with some abatement of the expression, “Behold! the tabernacle of God is with us, “and he will dwell with us, and we shall be his people, “and he himself shall be with us, and be our God.”

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BUT alas ! this is a visionary state of perfection, and beyond the present condition of human nature. The characters of societies, like those of individuals, will always be made up of a mixture of virtues and vices ; and all, that can be done by men, either in their public or private capacities, is to keep the point of perfection in view, to approach to it as near as they can ; and in opposition to false religion, and no religion at all, to tyranny and oppression on the one hand, and to anarchy and confusion on the other, to raising disturbances in government, out of a spirit of party and faction, and to meanly submitting to real evils, which may easily be corrected and removed ; in opposition, I say, to all this, “ to fear God and the king, and to meddle not with “ them, who are given to change.”

THE first of these duties, “ the fear of God,” which is a necessary ingredient in every plan of human happiness, hath, in the language of scripture, a very extensive meaning ; and comprehends every passion or affection, of which the Divine Perfections can possibly be the object : And fear is substituted for the other passions of the mind, because it is the most active principle within us ;
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and perhaps the first, which is excited from an apprehension of the power and justice of God: though love, and gratitude, and reverence, will as naturally flow from our apprehensions of his other perfections. When therefore we are commanded "to fear God," we are commanded to entertain a just notion of God, and of the relation which we stand in to him, and to be affected in a manner conformable to it. But a just notion of God, with the affections, which correspond with it, will necessarily produce a character in life, which, free from all the nonsense of superstition and enthusiasm, will be the most amiable and useful to others, as well as most happy in itself.

WHOEVER has a just notion of God will acknowledge, that the world is under his government and protection; that all men are in subjection to him; and that it is their interest, as well as duty, to obey his will. He will also know, that holiness, purity, and justice, are perfections which belong to God; and therefore, that nothing will please him, but what is agreeable to holiness, purity, and justice. And lastly; he will know that God is good and merciful, and that the happiness

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of his reasonable creatures is the great end of his creation and providence ; and therefore he will conclude, that it is his duty to promote the same end ; that the interest of religion, and the glory of God, coincide with it ; and that it can never be the will of God, that men should be made miserable by their fellow-creatures ; because it is impossible that God should propose two contrary things at the same time, and ordain the misery of those, whom he most affectionately loves, and has made for happiness.

IN short, the goodness of God, and his love for mankind, is one of the strongest motives to persuade men to love one another ; and his holiness, justice, and purity, are equally powerful motives to persuade men to be holy, just, and pure. The “ fear of God,” therefore, which hath all these perfections for its object, will most probably produce justice and fidelity, holiness and purity, love and benevolence, amongst men ; or in other words, will most probably make them happy.

RELIGION, it must be owned, hath often failed in producing these great advantages to the world, and the

most opposite effects have seemed to flow from it ; but though this must be owned, yet the account which I have given of it, is still true. Its natural and genuine effects are those which I have mentioned ; and its failure in producing them is always owing to the passions, and prejudices, and ignorance of men.

It was long, and once almost universally thought, that pains and penalties were necessary to promote the glory of God, and the interest of religion ; and that those, who had the power, had the right to torment and punish their fellow-creatures here for the good of their souls, and to secure their salvation hereafter. Hence arose irreconcilable hatred and resentment ; and the world was often filled with confusion and bloodshed. But, we are now grown wiser ; we know, that the “ fear “ of God,” or true notions of the Divine Nature, direct us to a different conduct. We have learned also from experience, as well as from reason, the great injustice and bad policy of this measure. We are convinced, that every man, while he continues a peaceable subject, hath a right to follow the dictates of his own conscience, in the professing of his faith, and the worshiping of God ;

that the attempt of compelling men to follow the consciences of others, is as dangerous to public peace, as destructive of true religion ; and lastly, that the best means to preserve and promote both, are to withdraw that attempt ; to treat all who differ in opinion from us with brotherly affection and charity, and to leave them at liberty to determine for themselves, what they ought to believe as necessary to salvation ; and what they ought to perform in the worship of God, as most acceptable to him.

Our ancestors at the revolution acted on this principle. Among the many excellent improvements which were made in our constitution about that period, the toleration of Protestant dissenters was not the least. It banished, as far as it went, persecution and oppression on account of religion, from amongst us. It removed a great blemish, which disgraced our religious establishment, and contributed to encrease its strength as well as to improve its beauty. In a word, it put a stop to as many evils, and produced as much good, as perhaps the principles and spirit of those times would then allow ; and left to those who came after them, the duty
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and glory of finishing at a proper season, the work which they began.

“THAT season, I trust, is now approaching. An opportunity will, I hope, soon be offered to us, of shewing, that we deserve the character, which we have long assumed among Protestants ; of placing religious liberty on its true foundation ; and of giving to all who dissent from our religious establishment, and are good subjects to the state, that legal security, to which reason, and the gospel, and sound policy, undoubtedly entitle them.”

THE next duty recommended to us is “the fear of the king ;” or a dutiful submission to civil authority. Though the wise man in giving this advice, had, without doubt, a respect to a particular form of government ; yet it is applicable to every form of government : and we are directed to pay such submission and obedience to our governors, as the constitution of government under which we live requires.

WE cannot enjoy in any degree the blessings of Providence, without living in society ; and we cannot live in society without some kind of government or other ; and the very nature of government supposes the power of the whole,

whole, for the better execution of it, to be committed to a part ; and the distribution of it, whatever it is, to be the measure and rule of submission and obedience : and consequently, this degree of submission and obedience is a duty, to which all men are obliged ; which regulates our behaviour towards the lowest officer in the state, as well as the highest ; and which not only includes submission and obedience in the execution of their office ; but also respect and reverence to their persons.

ON these principles also the holy scriptures strongly and frequently enforce this duty on the consciences of men ; and the authority of revelation is added to that of reason, in the plainest and most decisive terms. “ Let every soul,” says St. Paul, “ be subject to the higher powers.” — “ The powers that be, are ordained of God ; ” — “ wherefore ye “ must needs be subject not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.” — “ Render therefore to all their dues : tribute, to whom tribute is due, custom, to whom custom, fear, “ to whom fear, honour, to whom honour.” “ Submit yourselves,” says St. Peter, “ to every ordinance of men for the “ Lord’s sake : whether it be to the king as supreme, or “ unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him : — for “ so is the will of God.” And a greater authority than either

ther St. Paul or St. Peter requires us to “ render unto Cæsar
“ the things that are Cæsar’s.”

THE obligation therefore to this duty is placed upon as good foundation as the obligation to any other social duty ; and the best means which we can employ to secure to ourselves and posterity, the blessing of living under a quiet government, are to act under a sense of it ; to believe that obedience and submission to civil authority is commanded by God ; that every thing which hath a tendency to undermine that authority, or lessen that reverence and esteem, which is due to it, is an offence against God ; and that no advantages can ever be an equivalent for the mischiefs which will arise from a disregard or contempt of it.

By the constitution of government, under which we live, every member of the state hath great and ample privileges which belong to him. These privileges have long been, and still are the inheritance and glory of Englishmen ; and we have a right to support and maintain them against any measures, which are carried on to lessen or destroy them. The constitution, which gives power to those who govern us, gives it only for the good of the public ; and whenever it is employed to a contrary purpose, it
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gives us a right to controul or restrain it, and to defend ourselves against it. But this right is not to be exerted in the same manner on all occasions ; it varies as the circumstances of things vary : and very few can ever arise, which will render violence either necessary or prudent.

OUR governors are fallible, like other men ; and, considering the difficulties of their station, ought in many cases to be treated with the greatest indulgence. In other cases we ourselves may mistake, and form a wrong judgment of things ; and if we knew the whole of them, should own our complaints to be groundless and imaginary. And cases may happen, in which it may be out of the power of the wisest counsels, and honestest intentions, to remove the cause of our complaints : and the evils, which we feel, may, like the storms and tempests in the constitution of nature, be the effects of general laws, which are the source of all our happiness. Lastly ; though sometimes the evils which we suffer, may be real and great ; yet violence may produce worse and greater : and therefore we are still obliged to continue in obedience, and to wait for such opportunities of removing them, as are not inconsistent with the general good.

IN a word ; the peace, the safety, the happiness of the public, are the great ends of civil government ; and as a dutiful behaviour to those who govern us, is in general the best means of obtaining them ; so resistance to government, opposition to the execution of law and justice, and seditions and rebellion, are the surest ways of overturning and destroying them : and liberty is never in greater danger, than when the execution of law is interrupted ; nor ever more violated and infringed, than in times of licentiousness and rebellion. A people can no more be said to enjoy liberty, when the turbulent and needy have it in their power, whenever they please, to disturb the peace, invade the property, defame the characters, and affront the persons of their neighbours, than if they were under the government of a single tyrant : and true lovers of liberty will guard as much against the one as the other, by reverencing, supporting, and assisting lawful authority, or the execution of power regulated by the laws and constitution of the country, in which they live ; or in other words, “ by
“ fearing the king.”

THE last duty, which is recommended to us, is “ not to
“ meddle with them, who are given to change.” And this duty is not unnecessarily added to those which precede it :

for though the fear of God, and a reverence for the authority of government, will indispose men to adopt any measures, or introduce any changes, which are inconsistent with the peace and order of society ; yet in general they are very apt to complain at, and to be dissatisfied with their present condition ; and by indulging this humour, they soon grow extremely miserable and unhappy ; are displeased with every thing, which is carried on in the ordinary way ; and are ready to unite themselves with every bold and daring projector, who is driven either by his necessities or ambition, to alter or overthrow present establishments. And, when they are once engaged, their passions grow warm and enflamed ; they become full of bitterness and resentment against those, who oppose them ; and all the mischiefs of violence and a party spirit break in upon them, and overwhelm and destroy every barrier, which the piety and wisdom of ages had erected for the security of public happiness.

WE ought then to be always on our guard against such a disposition of mind as this ; we ought to testify our abhorrence of it upon every occasion ; to check it whenever it begins to act, or whatever form it assumes. And lastly ; we ought to set a high value on a constitution of
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government, which enables us to live quiet and peaceable lives ; and not wantonly and foolishly to join with those, who set up to improve and reform it.

OUR own constitution of government is thought, and justly thought to answer these purposes in a great degree. It had this end in view in its original frame. It hath never lost sight of it in the various struggles and convulsions, which have happened in a long course of ages ; and hath, by the virtue and wisdom of our ancestors, been often and greatly improved. It may still perhaps admit of farther improvement ; and when necessity requires and opportunity invites, it ought to be improved. But it is not every man, who is capable of doing it. Like a tender plant, it will not bear the handling of a rough and unskilful hand. It must be touched with delicacy and tenderness ; and whatever change is introduced, it must be done with sobriety and temper, and with a wisdom, which is able to discern the consequences of things, as well as to remove present inconveniencies : and above all, a spirit of party and faction must have no share in directing the counsels or actions of those who attempt it.

THE advice then of “ meddling not with those, who are
“ given to change,” is of the utmost importance, and, joined

with that of "fearing God and the king," is the great foundation of social happiness: and I will add nothing more to illustrate and confirm this truth, than repeat that observation, with which I set out at the beginning of this discourse, and which can never be too often repeated; that a disregard and contempt of it hath been often the occasion of the greatest calamities, which this and other countries have suffered; and the disregard and contempt of it, whenever it becomes the prevailing character of any country, will most certainly have the same effect.

WOULD to God, that I could say we had no reason to apprehend this in our own times, and our own country! I fear we have, or at least we have good reason to be alarmed at our present situation, and to be upon our guard against the dangers which threaten us.

IT may be thought perhaps, that I have here in view the rebellion which is carrying on in our distant provinces, and the ill success which we have had in reducing them to obedience; the encouragement, which has been, and still is given to them by a desperate and daring faction at home; and lastly, the hostilities in which we are engaged with our ancient and most formidable foreign enemy. But though these circumstances are full of great hazard and difficulty,

difficulty, yet I have not these in view. I trust, under the protection and with the assistance of Providence, our resources are sufficient to vindicate and recover our just lawful rights over the first; and to disappoint and defeat the schemes and attempts of the other two. What I refer to is of a more serious and alarming nature; the mention of it more suitable to my place and function, and which cannot be applied either to compliment and flatter, or to reproach and blame, any set of men or party amongst us. It is applicable to all parties. It is the state of religion, and morals, and the character and temper of our people in general, which ought to raise the alarm, and which is the principal cause of all our difficulties and distresses; and the correcting and reforming of which, is the only remedy which can be applied to them.

FOR let me ask you a few questions, which all of you will be able to answer, either from what you observe on the conduct of other men, or from the informations of your own consciences.

Do you think, that the fear of God hath that authority in influencing the behaviour of the people of this land as it ought to have? Do they seem to pay that regard to him, which is due; or to consider him as their Creator,
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their Supreme Governor and Sovereign Judge, who will finally reward or punish them for obeying or disobeying his will? Are they restrained from indulging their passions, from pursuing their pleasures, and promoting their private interest in any instance, for fear of offending him? Or is it not rather a common practice to oppose his authority, to plead for indulgences which are clearly forbidden by him, to speak contemptibly of the most solemn acts of religion, and to neglect his public worship for the most trifling reasons, or no reason at all?

LET me again ask you, whether the morals of our people are in a better state, than their religion? or rather, whether these have not declined, as indeed must always be the case, in proportion to the decay of piety, and the neglect of our duty to God? Are not the most notorious instances of corruption and perjury often considered as mere matters of course? Doth not the violation of the marriage vow pass over almost every day without fixing, scarcely, any reproach on those who are guilty of it? In short; are not pleasures and amusements, some of them of the most destructive, others of the most trifling nature, and the gratification of our sensual appetites, the great business of our lives? And is there any appearance of lessening our expences, restraining our luxury, and correcting

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our vanity, even now, when we are the most incapable of supporting them, and under the chastisement of one of the heaviest judgments of Providence ?

LET me ask you, in the last place, whether there is that reverence for authority, which is necessary for the support of government and order ? or rather, whether a disposition to obey the laws, and to submit to the subordinations of civil life, is not almost entirely worn out and gone ? Whether indecent and violent invectives against the most exalted, as well as the most virtuous character in the nation ; cries for liberty, where nothing is meant but licentiousness, and complaints of oppression, where the laws are only put in execution ; systems of religion and plans of government held out for the public choice, as if at present we had neither, and so wild and extravagant, as would, if they were admitted, defeat the very ends of both, are symptoms of health and strength in the state, and prognosticate a continuance of its prosperity and happiness ? In a word ; whether all this, joined with the enthusiasm of one part, the violence and faction of another, the coolness and indifference of a third, and the readiness of our people to follow the most desperate and profligate leaders, may not prevail to such a degree, as to bear down the sober sense and virtue of those that remain ?

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LET us then, in opposition to all these evils, follow the advice in the text, and “fear God and the king, and meddle not with them who are given to change.” Let us endeavour to revive the influence of religion on the principles of the gospel, and without superstition and enthusiasm; the influence of government and authority upon the principles of our constitution: and let us not be led away by a spirit of faction and party, to disturb the measures and lessen the credit of those who govern us. But, as good men, and good Christians, as good subjects to the king, and good friends to the public, as desiring to enjoy the fruits of our labour here, and the rewards of our virtue hereafter; let us lead peaceable and quiet lives in all godliness and honesty, and let us have no other object of contention in our view, than to excel each other in loyalty to our sovereign, love to our country, and charity to one another. And do thou, O God! inspire us with this principle, and assist us in the exercise of it, through the merits and intercession of thy Son Jesus Christ our Saviour; to whom, &c.

F I N I S.

